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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the dual role of the advocate for physically disabled students in higher education. Considered is the advocates responsibility in helping the student deal with five principal groups: peers, professors, administrators, family, and the community. The dual mission of advocates is seen to include acting as the one who argues on the student's behalf and assisting the student to be his own advocate. (Author/SBH)

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ADVOCACY: ISSUES FOR DISABLED IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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As an educator in the field of Special Education for ten years, I believe we must help our students develop their intellectual skills and we must also be advocates of our students. We must take on the role of advocate because most societies and bureaucracies resist addressing themselves to people whose needs vary from the so called norm. Students' self-worth and achievement are assailed from many corners and we must reaffirm them as the worthwhile human beings they are, while we struggle with them to make their needs known.

As an advocate for students in higher education who have physical disabilities, I see my role, on the one hand, as the person who supports or argues on their behalf. The other aspect of this position, and perhaps the major function of the advocate, is in assisting disabled students to be their own advocate. This twofold mission can be viewed as the goal for the Office of Specialized Services on any campus. This office should consider, as its constituents, students who are generally qualified for admission, but who have physical impairments which prevent them from seeing, hearing, moving freely, reading or writing. As the counselor for these special students, the two-fold role of the advocate is perhaps the most important part of my daily work. With the philosophy of speaking on behalf of the students, when necessary, and educating them to speak on their own behalf, we can take a closer look at the specific ways in which this advocacy works out on a daily basis.

Student interaction evolves around five principal groups of people: I. Peers II. Professors III. Administrators IV. Family V. Community. There are contributions to be made by the advocate in each of these areas.

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I. Peers

Since the disabled person in many countries is not totally mainstreamed throughout their elementary and secondary education, their peers have not had normal interaction with them. The disabled person is regarded as different and perhaps not quite human. I believe we must heighten the sensitivity and awareness of students with limited exposure to the disabled. We have an annual 24 hour Swim-a-thon principally to raise money for our program. We have bought a spare wheelchair, physical education equipment and we are providing monies to students or faculty who wish to research and develop new equipment for disabled students. This one event has brought a cross section of every constituency on campus to swim or sponsor swimmers. Participation in such an event increases awareness of our students and the program. This year the event was coordinated by a committee and directed by one of our disabled students. She staged an awareness day where non-disabled students, faculty, and administrators rode in wheelchairs for all or part of a day or attempted an obstacle course in a chair. Simulating a disability, even for a short time, allowed students to appreciate the disabled persons' mobility problems. There was a lot of fun connected with each of these occasions. People participating in an event with enjoyment are bound to be brought to a closer understanding of one another.

For effective peer interaction the disabled student must be totally integrated in courses, extracurricular activities, and on-campus facilities. Fifteen of our 55 students live in on-campus housing. This is the most intense way for non-disabled students to get to know the disabled. It doesn't always work out happily. One of our visually impaired young men had extreme difficulty getting along with his roommates. They forced him out of housing and he was in need of an advocate because of his rage at being ousted. The advocate in this instance had to intercede on the young man's behalf, with the Dean and Housing personnel.

After three weeks of suspension from housing, the young man was placed in a different apartment due to the advocate's pressure. During the three-week period the advocate counseled with the young man, his psychologist and his father, in order to help the student control himself and live more successfully with his new roommates. This was an extreme case, most students' problems involve personality conflicts of a minor nature.

Students need natural opportunities to eat and drink together, in addition to going to classes, concerts and lectures. Disabled students date the non-disabled, they fall in love, they make love, they argue, they get depressed. They are just like any other student on campus. That almost sounds simplistic to say, but a faculty person wondered out loud if disabled students were capable of sexual relations or ever dated the non-disabled. Counselors have stated that they didn't know how to counsel students because they were not medical experts in a particular disability. The faculty is an important group to discuss because even they forget that the disabled are human beings.

II. Professors

Professors sometimes need assurance that disabled students are capable of being successful. They should be placing the same demands on the disabled students as they place on others. Testing may be different because an amanuensis may be necessary, but it must not be any less rigorous. The advocate must speak individually and collectively with the faculty to have them accept every disability possible. We have a deaf man coming as a student next year. Our faculty has never had an interpreter in their class. The advocate will have to speak with each faculty member involved in the student's program, to explain what is expected, of the faculty member and of the student.

At times one must reassure the faculty that it is alright to put pressure on a particular student. One faculty member was intimidated by a manipulative disabled woman and asked if she was physically capable of doing the work. Knowing that this particular student was involved in many student organizations, had a boyfriend, and had tried to get away with other requirements in the past, it was easy to counsel the faculty member to proceed with his pressure for research papers. The student was also spoken with, so she would realize that the advocate did not want to foster her lack of independence and manipulativeness.

Another faculty member recently proudly announced that he had a blind man from a neighboring city coming to his summer institute. He also said that he had insisted that the young man have an attendant stay with him in the campus housing. The faculty person stipulated this over the objections of the young man and his mother. When asked why he forced the man to have an attendant, the faculty person said that there was a lake near the path from the housing and he didn't want the student walking into it. The faculty member also mentioned, in passing, that the student had traveled all over Europe on his own. Since this entire conversation occurred at a cocktail party, the advocate gently indicated that perhaps the faculty person should reflect on the need for an attendant and also make an appointment during the day to discuss the whole situation with the advocate. This well-intentioned but ill-informed faculty person agreed to the meeting. During the meeting, the legal aspects of recent legislation preventing colleges from discriminating against disabled students; personal experiences with blind people on campus and mobility training were all discussed to reassure the faculty member that the young man would require minimal assistance. The advocate also stated that she would be on hand the first day of the institute to give mobility training and to meet the student.

Perhaps the most important place to be an effective advocate and to have students be leaders, is in relationship to the administration.

III. Administration

The group of people responsible for the direction of the college or university; for budget; for the tone or attitudes toward minority groups; for campus architecture; etc, are the key people to convince that the disabled student must be heard. The most important person to have on your side is the president and his/her advisors. This is the group on campus that students tend to be most intimidated by so we must help them overcome their fears.

Students, even on a barrier-free campus, continue to have areas of concerns. Periodically they will be upset with topics like housing, snow removal, repairs of sidewalks or roadways, parking, needs for new curb cuts, etc. Instead of sending memos (which we do on occasion) or meeting with administrators involved, the advocate urges the students to sit down together, make a list of valid concerns and set up a meeting with the administrators whom they believe can address the problems.

A meeting such as this recently took place around housing problems. Students raised their concerns about: having to move out during periods in the summer; being notified late about new apartments; numbers of disabled students assigned to housing and roommate selection. The student who organized the meeting came a few weeks earlier and was advised to gather concerns, other students and selected administrators. She did this and the meeting was held. The irritation the students have felt about the issues was properly channeled and the administrators were able to hear their concerns. The result of the meeting was that concrete steps will be taken to ameliorate the problems. There also was a suggestion that we get together on a monthly basis to discuss, in an ongoing manner, anything related to housing.

Another example of students being helped to be their own advocates occurred recently when a graduating, serious, hardworking senior needed to have a paper marked in order to get credit for an incomplete grade. She visited the advocate's office prior to seeing the Vice President of Academic Affairs. She was seeing him because her professor was away from campus and couldn't be present to grade her paper. She went to the Vice President's office and the advocate came a bit later to see how she was progressing. When I arrived, the Vice President called and the secretary, seeing me, said that I would speak with him about the student's problems. I said that it would be better if the student spoke on her own behalf. She did, and the difficulties were resolved. She graduated a week later. She solved her own problem by working it out with the administrator. A very important lesson, especially upon graduation.

The family of disabled students must be interacted with in a different manner by the on-campus advocate.

IV. Family

Students becoming their own advocates, is of utmost importance, when it comes to asserting their rights with their own family. Families who are loving and supportive of their disabled children can tend to be smothering of the young person's desire for independence.

In a group therapy session with disabled and non-disabled students, the reaction to going home was similar. Parents were relating to the child they knew, not the young adult who was before them. Most students dreaded going home, refused to go home at all or just tolerated the family in order to have decent meals and clean clothing. This sounds ungrateful to parents, but it is a way of asserting independence and establishing an individual identity.

Disabled students who have been more dependent than non-disabled people, and their parents who have given more complete care than other parents, find the separation process very painful. The disabled students who reside on campus have moved from a protective environment to a place where they conduct their own lives. One parent, frightened of this transition, instructed a physically disabled student's roommates to take care of her daughter. The parent had to hand her heavy burden over to someone else, so the guilt of leaving would not overwhelm her when she got back home. The burden on the roommates was unnecessary and the reputation of the disabled woman was already prejudiced. Her roommates and she arrived at many compromises. The student ended up sitting on the floor to dry dishes she might otherwise have dropped - to prove her ability to contribute to the responsibilities of living together.

It is the responsibility of the advocate to encourage independence and self-help in the maturing student. Developing therapeutically orientated groups to aide the student in the separation process gets them ready for maximum self reliance. When students take their place in the community, there are no formally designated advocates. They must be prepared to take on the role of advocate.

V. Community

Our students in developing links with their communities are concerned that the communities share the architectural and attitudinal barrier-free quality they find on campus.

One year ago a small group of people got together to pressure a local restaurant to go barrier-free. The manager resisted, but the advocates persisted by speaking and writing to the companies' headquarters. The manager relented, made the architectural adaptations and became very proud of his accomplishment. When he became ego-involved in the process, his pride finished the job. As a

result of his good will and desire to create a sense of awareness in the service personnel in the restaurant, the advocate suggested that she and a few students conduct an awareness session at his restaurant. He agreed, set up a two-hour slot in a weekly meeting and invited the group to come. The advocate was joined by three disabled students. The advocate wrote a brief paper discussing serving disabled patrons and gave it to the 40 employees. The employees tried riding wheelchairs up and down the newly constructed ramps; asked questions; listened intently as students discussed their experiences when dining out and generally were very receptive to the experience. The restaurant supplied dinner as a reward for our session. In the spirit of fostering independence, the advocate wrote a formal letter to each student thanking them for their participation. Speaking to such a large group can be important to a prospective employer and students should think of future employment.

Much work must be done in communities throughout the United States, for it is there that the progressive attitudes toward the disabled and barrier-free design must be extended. When we work this intensely with students, first as their advocates and then passing that responsibility onto them, we raise their expectations of what life should be. They will have to continue as the leaders in their various communities, bringing others to a new level of awareness of what it means to have freedom of movement possible for everyone. Our role as advocates will be to support our students' leadership in this new effort.